



Virginia Relay

20 Years

Celebrating 20 Years of Quality Telecommunication Access





COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Office of the Governor

Robert F. McDonnell
Governor

November 2, 2011

The Employees of the Virginia Relay Center
831 Park Avenue S.W.
Norton, Virginia 24273

Dear Friends:

Greetings and congratulations as you celebrate twenty years of quality telecommunications access for Virginians who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind and speech disabled. Your commitment to quality services and your willingness to volunteer for the Norton area's health and human services organizations and events, speak volumes about the dedication and work ethic of the individuals employed at the Virginia Relay center.

Since 1991, the Norton center has processed millions of relay calls that have enabled citizens with sensory disabilities to remain employed, seek professional services, and communicate with their families and friends. Each day you make it possible for someone to schedule a doctor's appointment, inquire about a job, or converse with their grandchildren. Virginia's relay operators have truly been our communication connection for the past twenty years.

I know that Health and Human Resources Secretary Bill Hazel and Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Director Ron Lanier share my enthusiasm and pride for the high level of services that your center provides. Please accept our appreciation and best wishes as we recognize jobs performed extraordinarily well.

Sincerely,


Robert F. McDonnell

RFM: es

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About the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH) and Virginia Relay

About VDDHH

Established in 1972 by the Virginia General Assembly, VDDHH helps reduce communication barriers between individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and hearing people, including family members and service providers. VDDHH's services include:

- Virginia Relay Oversight
- Assistive Technology Equipment Distribution and Technical Assistance (TAP)
- Interpreter Referral and Screening
- Community and Outreach Services
- Information and Referral

"VDDHH and Virginia Relay work closely to provide a vital service to the people of Virginia," says VDDHH Director Ronald Lanier. "If the past twenty years are any indication, we will remain on the cutting edge of telecommunications technology, helping all Virginians communicate with ease."

Prior to being named director in 1997, Lanier managed VDDHH's Technology Assistance Program and served as a job placement counselor for the deaf and hard of hearing at the Department of Rehabilitative Services. In 2006, he was appointed for a two-year term to the National Deafness and Other Communication Disorders Advisory Council of the National Institutes of Health. He is a member of the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities and the Advisory Board for the Partnership for People with Disabilities.

About Virginia Relay

A no cost public service, Virginia Relay connects people who are deaf, hard of hearing, DeafBlind or speech disabled with standard telephone users. The conversation is then relayed between the two parties by a specially trained Virginia Relay Communications Assistant (CA).

Relay services are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year, with no limit on the number or length of calls a user may make. By law, every call is handled with the strictest confidentiality. Anyone may initiate a Virginia Relay call, simply by dialing 7-1-1.

"Virginia Relay has brought amazing technologies and services to our users over the past twenty years," says Virginia Relay and Technology Programs Manager Clayton Bowen. "Thousands of people depend on us every day to communicate, and it's not something we take lightly. We want every conversation to be as seamless as possible."



Virginia Relay Advisory Council (VRAC)

Comprised of volunteers from a variety of personal and professional backgrounds in Virginia's deaf, hard-of-hearing and hearing communities, VRAC represents the needs and concerns of Virginia Relay users and serves as a focus group for new calling features and services.

Voting Members:

Eileen McCartin, Ph.D., VRAC Chair
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Robbin Blankenship
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Ann Cutshall
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Abra Jacobs
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Valerie Luther
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Non-Voting Members:

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Convenient, State-of-the-Art Calling Features

Virginia Relay offers an array of user-friendly calling features. Whenever new technologies emerge, every effort is made to implement them as quickly as possible. Here are some of the features currently available (visit www.varelay.org for a complete list and step-by-step calling instructions):

- **TTY (text telephone)** – For people with hearing or speech loss. The Virginia Relay Communications Assistant (CA) voices the TTY user's text and types the words of the standard phone user, relaying the conversation between both parties.

- **Voice Carry-Over (VCO)** – For people who can speak clearly but have significant hearing loss. Using a specially designed telephone with a text screen, VCO users speak directly to the person they're calling and read his or her response (typed by the CA) on the text screen of the VCO phone.

- **Speech-To-Speech (STS)** – For people with mild to moderate speech difficulties who can hear clearly. A specially trained CA revoices the STS user's words to the other person. When that person responds, the STS user listens directly to what is said.

- **Hearing Carry-Over (HCO)** – For people with significant speech disabilities who can hear what is being said over the telephone. The person with the speech disability uses a TTY or similar device to type his or her side of the conversation.

- **VRS (Video Relay Service)** – Allows American Sign Language users to place and receive calls via video conferencing.

- **Internet Relay** – Make calls using your computer, Web phone, personal digital assistant (PDA) or any other Internet-capable device.

- **Virginia Relay Text Messaging** – Use your text pager or wireless device (e.g. Motorola T900, T-Mobile Sidekick®, BlackBerry, Palm Treo) to send messages to family members and friends, who then receive the message via their standard phone or TTY.

- **Spanish-to-Spanish and English-to-Spanish Translation**

Technology Assistance Program (TAP)

Offered by the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH), TAP provides no cost and reduced-priced telecommunications equipment to qualified applicants whose disabilities prevent them from using a standard telephone.

To qualify for the program, you must be deaf, hard of hearing, DeafBlind, or speech disabled. You must also be a Virginia resident and meet income eligibility requirements that are based on household income and family size.

Assistive devices available through TAP include:

- TTYs
- Amplified telephones
- Voice Carry Over (VCO) phones
- Captioned telephones
- Outgoing speech amplifier phones
- Phone and doorbell signalers
- Hearing Carry Over (HCO) phones

For more information about TAP, call 1-800-552-7917 (voice/TTY).

Outreach Team

VDDHH's network of Outreach Providers sponsors workshops, support groups and training sessions to help all Virginians—including caregivers, public safety officials and business professionals—learn more about hearing loss and ways to communicate with those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Staff members are also available to assist new Virginia Relay users and their families and friends.

To request assistance, contact the Outreach Provider nearest you or call 1-800-552-7917 (voice/TTY).

VDDHH, Richmond Area

Gary Talley, VDDHH Outreach & Community Services Programs Manager, Gary.Talley@vddhh.virginia.gov

Sherry Ross, Sherry.Ross@vddhh.virginia.gov (Central Virginia)

Trish Banks, Virginia CapTel Specialist, Trish.Banks@vddhh.virginia.gov

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The disAbility Resource Center, Fredericksburg Area

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Deaf & Hard of Hearing Services Center, Southwest & Western Virginia Area

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Jack Owens, abingdon@deafhh.org (Abingdon)

Drema Bagley, drema@deafhh.org (Roanoke and New River Valley)

Margaret Bryant, Lynchburg@deafhh.org (Lynchburg)

William Hess, whess@clinchdependent.org (Grundy)

Feta, Fernsler, dhsc.feta@gmail.com (Staunton)

Donna Day, dday@accessindeoendence.org (Winchester)

The Connie Reasor Deaf Resource Center (CRDRC), Norton & Grundy Area

Jack Owens, crdrc@deafhh.org (Norton)

Endeppence Center, Inc., Norfolk (Hampton Roads Area)

Brenda Estes, bestes@endeppence.org

Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired

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Elizabeth Spiers, Elizabeth.spiers@dbvi.virginia.gov (statewide)

Eastern Shore Center for Independent Living, Inc.

Abra Jacobs, jacaw2003@yahoo.com (Exmore)



1991: Virginia Relay Center opens in Norton.

1996: Extended Relay Choice Profile announced to provide callers with automatic caller preferences and access to frequently called numbers.

1999: Implementation of 7-1-1 three-digit dialing to reach the Relay Center from any location in the state.

2000: Virginia Relay introduces 2-Line Voice Carry Over (VCO) and Speech-To-Speech (STS) to help people with significant hearing loss and mild to moderate speech difficulties.

2002: Virginia Relay Advisory Council (VRAC) established at the request of relay user groups.

2003: Virginia Relay launches our semiannual newsletter, The Commonwealth Caller.

Internet Relay service added, allowing users to make and receive Relay calls online.

Video Relay Service implemented. This feature enables American Sign Language users to converse in their native language with the person they're calling.

5-1-1 Virginia is launched. A one-stop resource for public transportation.

2004: Virginia Relay launches www.varelay.org.

Virginia Relay debuts in-center Customer Care Line.

3-Way Calling (customer initiated).

2005: First Celebrate Communication event held in Fairfax.

Virginia Relay Partner introduced to all Virginia-based businesses. The free program helps familiarize businesses with Relay calls, helping to reduce or eliminate hang ups.

Virginia becomes first state to offer Relay Text Messaging.

2006: TAP publishes Spanish, large print and Braille materials.

Virginia Relay introduces Conference Service to assist Relay users in the workplace.

2007: Kids Keeping in Touch through Virginia Relay, a curriculum for school-aged children, is launched throughout the Commonwealth. Lesson plans directly correlate to Virginia Department of Education Standards of Learning.

2008: Virginia Relay celebrates 400th Relay Partner.

2010: Virginia Relay launches blog, www.varelayblog.org. Let's Make a Virginia Relay Call DVD (part of the Kids Keeping in Touch through Virginia Relay curriculum kit) updated to include the newest technologies and services.

2011: Commonwealth signs new three year contract with AT&T with options for one year extensions.

CAs in the Community



In addition to providing 24-hour telecommunication services at the Relay Center, Virginia's communication assistants (CAs) are also active and dedicated members of the Norton community. Outreach is a very important part of every CA's job, and they regularly share information about the Relay Center and its services at public events, such as Wise County's annual Remote Area Medical (RAM) free clinic and the Best Friends Festival.

Within the Relay Center, CAs regularly hold fundraisers to support local charities. Over the years, the Center has raised donations for causes such as the United Way, the United Negro College Fund, Relay for Life, March of Dimes and Breast Cancer Awareness. They have also collected cell phones and socks for soldiers.

"Being active in the community provides another opportunity to share information about relay with the public," said Brenda Neely, AT&T manager. "The employees have especially enjoyed the opportunity to work with children and seniors to educate them about relay service. The Virginia Relay Center employee team has been quite generous with community fundraisers, food drives and clothing drives to continually support the community.

Like many small towns, Norton is the kind of place where neighbors rally to come to each other's aide in times of trouble or tragedy, and the employees of the Relay Center are no different. In 1992, when eight miners were killed by an explosion in the South Mountain Mine, the Relay Center provided free long distance phone calls for families as they waited for news and the staff collected food for the rescue workers. During the holiday season that year, the Center held a large toy drive to support the families of the miners who were lost.

In March 1993, Virginia was hit by a snowstorm that dropped 52 inches of snow on Norton, closing many major roads. To keep the Relay Center open, 30 employees stayed at the Center throughout the blizzard, working round the clock and taking naps on sofas in between handling calls.

The People of the Virginia Relay Center

The Virginia Relay Center serves an important purpose to the people of Virginia, enabling people who are deaf, hard of hearing, Deafblind, and speech disabled to place and receive calls via a regular telephone line. This service would not be possible were it not for the communication assistants (CAs) who work at the Center, relaying telephone conversations between voice/hearing individuals and someone who may have a hearing or speech loss. CAs are present at the Relay Center to receive calls 24 hours a day, and handle hundreds of thousands of Relay calls each year.

Today, AT&T and the Relay Center is one of Norton's largest employers, and when it opened twenty years ago, it provided well-paying job opportunities for a city that didn't have many to offer its residents at the time. "Living in a rural area, good jobs are hard to find," said Penny, who is one of more than 30 current CAs who have 20 years of service at the Relay Center. "AT&T coming to town seemed to be a very good opportunity and it was and still is."

"The Relay Center was a new business at the time I was hired," said Sharon, a CA for 19 years. "I was reentering the workforce after having my children and looking around to see what was out there. The Relay Center was new, it seemed interesting, and the pay was good. It was a great opportunity."

In addition to job opportunities, working at the Relay Center also offered educational opportunities, as AT&T provides its employees with training and tuition reimbursement for college courses. AT&T also has a cooperative labor-management venture with its Unions, called the Alliance for Employee Growth and Development Inc., which provides personal growth training opportunities for the Relay Center employees.

Several CAs have earned their bachelor's degrees, and one CA has earned a Ph.D. while working at the Relay Center. Carmella, a CA for 20 years, earned her bachelor's degree in Business Information Technology from King College, and is currently working towards her master's degree using the AT&T Tuition Assistance Program. "Getting a degree was a goal I had for many years," she said. "My education means a great deal to me and is an asset I will have forever."

As for the Center's low employee turnover rate, AT&T manager Brenda Neely attributes it to AT&T investing in its employees as well as the CAs enjoying their jobs. "Our people have helped make AT&T the number one communications company in the world, and we invest in them by creating and preserving high-tech jobs

that pay well, offer good benefits and provide opportunities for training and advancement," she said. "Additionally, employees in the Virginia Relay Center appreciate that they are providing a valuable service to members of the Relay community."

"In 1991, I was simply looking for a 'job,'" said CA Fayette. "Little did I know, by applying for a job as a relay operator, I would turn that application into a career with AT&T for 20 years. I have been blessed to be doing something that I thoroughly enjoy and get paid to do."

The CAs of the Virginia Relay Center take pride in the work they do and the service they provide for the Commonwealth. They were thrilled when it was announced last August that the Virginia Department of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Virginia Relay had again selected AT&T as its service provider, meaning they would all continue working for the Relay Center.

"Working at the Relay Center has given our CAs the opportunity to be more in tune to Deaf Culture and the communication challenges they often encounter," said Teresa Feeney, area manager, AT&T Relay Services. "The work we do here ensures that members of the deaf and hard-of-hearing community are able to communicate easily with the hearing community."

Michelle, one of the first CAs hired by the Relay Center in 1991, says her job has given her a new perspective. "My favorite part of working at the Relay Center is helping people place phone calls that I, as a hearing person, used to take for granted," she said.

Fayette remembers one telephone call in particular that helped her understand just how important a CA's job truly is. "I once placed a call for an elderly lady to her grandchild," she said. "This was the first time she had spoken to her grandchild on the phone, and I could just feel the excitement in her words coming across the TTY. To know that I was able to bring her such joy just made my day."



AT&T and the Virginia Relay Center: 20 Years Together

Since the Virginia Relay Center opened in 1991, AT&T has been the sole provider of Virginia's Relay services. As product manager of AT&T Relay services, Gail Sanchez has witnessed both Relay technology and the Relay Center evolve over the years, and was recently asked to reflect on AT&T and the Relay Center's 20-year partnership. "Twenty years ago, Relay centers were just starting to appear across the country, and Virginia was just the fifth state Relay call center opened by AT&T," she said. "Virginia was a high-demand area for Relay services and we had a very high volume of calls coming in from the beginning."

Even though the technologies then were limited and a bit awkward to use compared to the options of today, they were groundbreaking at the time, and the Relay Center opened a whole new world of opportunity to Virginia's deaf and hard-of-hearing communities to communicate and connect with other people. "When we first began receiving calls at the Relay Center, you could actually hear the excitement in people's voices when they were finally able to communicate with someone they hadn't spoken to in a while," said Sanchez.

"From the day the Relay Center opened, Virginia has always been a state that was determined to be very flexible for its Relay users," said Sanchez. "The Virginia Relay Center was one of the first centers to offer roaming calls, so that users didn't necessarily have to be in Virginia to call the Relay Center, and they were also one of the first states to use 711 before it became federally mandated in 2001 so that users didn't have to commit the Relay Center's 1-800 number to memory. A lot of Relay technologies and services that are now available everywhere were first introduced in the Virginia Relay Center."

In the early 2000s, AT&T and the Virginia Relay Center again were on the forefront of technology as more automation capabilities were added to Relay Services, which included enabling a Relay user to dial the number of the person they wanted to call, rather than having to relay it to the CA. User profiles were also created to store a user's preferred technology, so they no longer had to establish what kind of Relay call they wanted to make at the beginning of every phone call. This meant faster connections for Relay callers, with fewer steps between dialing the Relay Center and speaking to the person they wished to call. "Some states still don't offer automation with their Relay services, but Virginia has always been committed to providing its Relay users with the best possible experience," said Sanchez.

"The CAs of the Virginia Relay Center are known for being very dedicated to what they do..."

As Virginia Relay and AT&T both celebrate their 20th anniversary of providing Relay services throughout the Commonwealth, Relay users have more options than ever before when it comes to telecommunications technology. However, Sanchez says that innovative technology is only one aspect of why the Virginia Relay Center is special. "Virginia has the reputation for being the most experienced Relay Call Center in the industry. All of the CAs are well trained, and due to very little employee turnover at the center, most have years of experience," she said. "The Speech-to-Speech staff is so skilled at what they do, AT&T

manages all of its Speech-to-Speech services for the entire country through the Virginia Relay Center."

In addition to their professional expertise, Sanchez says the Virginia Relay Center staff is also known for their hearts. "The CAs of the Virginia Relay Center are known for being very dedicated to what they do, being committed to being the best at what they do, and for the outreach they do in their community."

In August 2011, Virginia Relay and AT&T announced that a new contract had been signed to keep AT&T as Virginia's Relay service provider through at least 2014, continuing a tradition that is now 20 years old.

"AT&T and the Virginia Relay Center have always had a wonderful working relationship, and AT&T is thrilled to have worked with the Center these past 20 years. Virginia has always had a sincere interest in providing the best Relay services for its residents, and we will continue to work together to give our users the best features and the best quality services."



Rethink Possible®

Virginia Relay Center CAs Share Stories of Appalachian Life

Coalfield Suite is a collection of poems, short stories, plays and photographs that celebrate Norton's rich history as captured by the communications assistants (CAs) of the Virginia Relay Center.

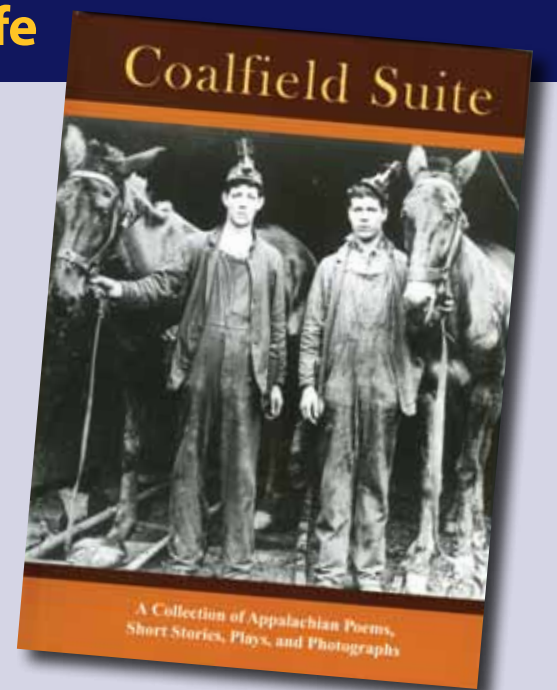
First published in 2006, the book is the result of a creative writing class offered to Virginia Relay CAs by the Alliance for Employee Growth and Development, Inc. Based on a similar project previously completed by the United Steelworkers of America, the class was taught by Dr. Vivian Bowlings Blevins, a native of Kentucky coal country with experience teaching creative writing to a wide range of demographic groups.

Through their work in the class, the CAs created poems as well as pieces of fiction and non-fiction that told their life stories and the history of their families' stories living and working in southwestern Virginia. During the first year of the program, the participants gave several public

performances of their work that were well received by audiences. The first 20-hour course was so successful it was soon expanded into an ongoing advanced writing seminar so the CAs could further develop their creative writing skills.

"As the employees of the Virginia Relay Center set out to improve their personal communication skills through this writing project, it quickly grew into an instrument of personal growth for most of the participants," said AT&T manager Brenda Neely. "Not only was it an educational opportunity, but the employees also came away with a stronger sense of self and their heritage."

Coalfield Suite is a unique illustration of the family values, humor, mystery and spirituality that make up Appalachian life, captured for generations to come by the people that have experienced it first-hand.



Virginia Relay Center Good Neighbor

Just across the street from the Virginia Relay Center is the Connie Reasor Deaf Resource Center, another facility dedicated to assisting those with hearing disabilities. Jack Owens is the outreach specialist who works there and for a total of eight counties in Southwest Virginia.

Owens regularly sees people who need financial assistance with getting hearing aids and other assistive devices. Part of his role is to help them navigate the system, preparing and processing forms to request financial help. If it weren't for the Connie Reasor Center and his office, Owens says, there wouldn't be people available to help people who are deaf with their needs. He gets requests every day from people needing special phones.

The center grew from the work of the late Connie Reasor, a special education teacher in Lee County, and Willie Collins, who is deaf, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They established the Communications Awareness Project to introduce sign language and deaf awareness in the community. Before the center would become a reality, Reasor was killed on Christmas Eve, 1995. Because the center was her vision and she played an integral part in the efforts to create it, the center named in her honor. It opened in December 1996.

The center has been housed in several locations but is now grounded in Norton in quarters it shares with the Southwest Virginia Club of the Deaf.

Owens says it means a lot to him to help people, and particularly the elderly, to get devices so they can communicate better. As part of his outreach duties, one thing Owens does is spread the word about the resource center and opportunities available through the Virginia Department of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. "We want them to know that we are here to help them," he said. He makes various presentations to groups throughout the region, letting people know about the center and the kinds of devices and assistance that is available to them.



SERVICES

Information and Referral Services: Sign language classes and resources; Americans with Disabilities Act community rights and responsibilities; finding and using interpreters; locating the right assistive technology; working with Virginia Relay to connect people using various telephone devices; community activities calendar.

Educational Services: Presentations and training programs to civic and professional groups; e-mail newsletters; website resources at www.deafhh.org.

Support Services: Volunteer work for community events; consultation with individuals and businesses; advocacy activities.

Outreach Services: Outreach specialists can provide individual assessments to determine which communication equipment is best for an individual.

Loan-2-Own Program: Offers various kinds of assistive technology to people who are deaf, hard of hearing, DeafBlind, or speech disabled. Equipment can be obtained free of charge or at a reduced rate depending on family income and size. Applicants may re-apply for new equipment every 4 years

CONTACT INFORMATION

The Connie Reasor Deaf Resource Center is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Thursdays and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Fridays. Owens is available other days by appointment only.

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Website: www.crdrc.org

A Positive Impact on Norton

Twenty years ago, Fred Ramey was a new kid in city government, still in college, when the very first prospects came to Norton looking to find a home for the state's new Virginia Relay Center.

Three companies were competing for the contract to run the center. Norton was competing to be the site they picked. Nearing the end of one important visit, Ramey recalls, confident city officials got a bombshell from the woman doing the site assessment that day. No, he remembers her saying; she didn't think the old grocery store building they showed her could be converted into a space that would meet her company's quality standards.

"We didn't see that coming," says Ramey, now assistant city manager. The mayor didn't blink, but quickly shot back this question: "How much time do we have to prove it to you?"

That set Norton down a risky but well-considered investment path, Ramey says, and it paid off. The city delivered and Norton was the site selected by AT&T, which landed the state contract. The old Piggly Wiggly grocery store was transformed into a relay center that has spent the past two decades serving the communications needs of people with hearing loss and speech disabilities. All along the way, Ramey says, the Virginia Relay Center has had sweeping and lasting influence on the city.

Clearly, it had a direct economic impact by bringing much-needed and well-paying jobs. But it did even more than that, Ramey says. Success with this project laid a foundation of confidence in city leaders to tackle future economic development endeavors. Further, he says, the people who have manned the center through the years have reached out and into the community, touching lives of those in need through their civic involvement and giving.

QUALITY PEOPLE, JOBS

"The quality of the people is why we got the relay center here and why it stayed," Ramey says.

They are active volunteers, raising money and donating manpower, giving back to the entire community and forging a special connection to the deaf community. "They've been more than just a business in town," Ramey says.

Twenty years ago, the region faced double-digit unemployment. Location of the center here "had an instant impact on quality employment like what we had not seen in the area," Ramey recalls.

The Relay Center found an eager workforce in Norton and the surrounding area. Employees were dependable. Many had higher education skills. They were loyal and stayed. The quality of their service distinguishes them from others and customers can tell the difference.

